

2016

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Recommended Citation

Christie, Shaheen M. (2016) "Book Review - An Archaeology of Human Decapitation Burials, Shaheen M. Christie," *Field Notes: A Journal of Collegiate Anthropology*. Vol. 8 , Article 11.
Available at: <https://dc.uwm.edu/fieldnotes/vol8/iss1/11>

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An Archaeology of Human Decapitation Burials

Katie Tucker. Barnsley, England: Pen and Sword, 2015.

264 pp. ISBN 978-1-47382-551-2. \$36.00.

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In this nuanced and well written volume, Katie Tucker aims to guide readers beyond considering prehistoric decapitation and associated violence strictly as a peri- or post-mortem rite due to warfare or intra/inter personal violence, demonstrating that this diverse practice was considered and utilized in culturally specific ways throughout many prehistoric and historic periods. Drawing on multiple lines of evidence (e.g., ancient literature, iconography, material culture, physical remains, and ethnographic cases), Tucker offers a thorough look at the complexity of the uses of the body in relation to decapitation in British prehistory. Tucker's central aim is to provide a critical examination of the previous interpretations of decapitation in the past and parse out the meanings of this socio-political, economic, and culturally constructed practice. She supports this central thesis by drawing on historical sources as well as skeletal and material culture recovered from a number of British and Continental European contexts (with a focus on those from the British Roman Iron Age). The main body of evidence is drawn from physical and archaeological contexts from Roman Britain during the Roman Iron Age, held today in a number of institutions and archaeological contract service firms. In her analysis, Tucker identifies evidence for variability in health, pathology, and trauma among decapitated individuals over time. With this data, she creates a comparative analysis of the geographic and temporal nature of decapitation contexts in British prehistory, from which she is ultimately able to produce a signature list for identifying different types of decapitation trauma in the physical remains for future researchers.

An Archaeology of Human Decapitation Burials is written for both academic and public audiences alike, although archaeologists and historians will appreciate the volume for its succinct overview of the diverse practice, particularly the osteological assessment of remains from the Roman and medieval periods in Britain. Tucker's volume has concisely presented much of her analyses and conclusions from her doctoral research (Tucker 2012), and provides additional photos, illustrations, and diagrams that aid the reader in understanding the catalogue of finds, analysis, and conclusions. One of the major contributions of this volume is Tucker's breadth of knowledge and meticulous osteological analysis of the physical remains, which led to the development of schemas for identifying decapitation types (187–93), and the overall nature of the trauma, stress, and health of numerous decapitated individuals. In addition, Tucker has provided strong evidence demonstrating that decapitation was used as the mechanism of death more often than was previously thought, and subsequently, was not strictly reserved for the corpse as a post-mortem rite, as was argued by previous authors.

Tucker begins the introduction (6–7) by outlining her contract position as the osteology specialist with the York Archaeological Trust, a position that has exposed her to the “out of the ordinary” human remains from the Romano-

British period examined in this study. This experience spiked her interest in conducting an osteological assessment of the larger contexts of decapitation in British prehistory further, with particular emphasis on the pathological conditions and trauma present on a select number of “headless Roman” remains. The first chapter, “The Study of Decapitation Burials” (8–23), provides useful syntheses of early antiquarian research (8–11) as well as later small-scale surveys (Clarke 1979; Harman et al. 1981; O’Brien 1999; Philpott 1991; Roberts and Cox 2003) of local and regional decapitation finds. The summary reveals two types of decapitation patterns and notes a variety of contradictory statements for specific decapitation contexts, which is the result of competing oversimplified interpretations and a lack of systematic consideration of these data by earlier scholars (20–22). Tucker’s literature review in the following chapters aims to address and question preconceived assumptions about the forms of decapitation practice. In the second chapter, “Evidence for Decapitation in British Prehistory” (23–45), Tucker summarizes the chief interpretations for decapitation practices by previous scholars and presents the reader with an overview of the chief physical evidence for peri-mortem trauma and post-mortem mutilation in formal and informal burials and isolated deposits from the Neolithic period (4000–2500 BC), Bronze Age (2500–800 BC), Iron Age (800 BC–AD 43), Roman Iron Age (AD 43–410), and medieval period (AD 450–1500) in Britain and Continental Europe. Tucker’s analysis revealed general patterns of similarity and difference in the use of decapitation within each temporal period and firmly indicated that none of the patterns detected should be attributed to notions of pan-British or pan-European meaning in prehistory.

The third chapter, “Decapitation in the Romano-British Period” (46–92), provides a detailed examination of the geographical, temporal, and site type contexts of many decapitation burials in Britain during the Roman Iron Age (AD 43–410). By comparing and contrasting the health, trauma, and socioeconomic data by site type (e.g., urban, rural, small town, villa), Tucker’s analysis is particularly illuminating, as it shows that multiple factors influenced the regional diversity of decapitation practices used during this period. Tucker’s analysis revealed regional patterns in the spatiotemporal use of decapitation practices on the basis of specific attributes such as age, sex, health, and site type. She also developed a list of osteological signatures to determine whether decapitation was deployed ante-, peri-, or post-mortem on an individual basis (87–92). This multi-scalar regional analysis and subsequent conclusions are further showcased in Tucker’s in-depth osteological analysis of the uses of decapitation practices in Roman York (*Eboracum*) in the fourth chapter, “Decapitations from Roman York—A Case Study” (93–103). The reader is brought back to Tucker’s work with the York Archaeological Trust (YAT) and is drawn into the nuanced levels of osteological analysis conducted to parse the evidence for differential markings of trauma found on decapitated individuals discovered during a series of YAT excavations in 2004 and 2005. From the recovered sample of decapitated individuals, analysis revealed a high number of “unusual aspects,” such as a statistically significant number of decapitated adult males when compared to the larger decapitation sample amassed from around the country (100–2). Upon reanalyzing the skeletal remains, Tucker utilized literary sources and settlement data from the Roman sites excavated by YAT in order to consider different interpretations for these “unique” burials. She concludes that decapitation was most likely the mechanism for death (a

peri-mortem rite) in a series of judicial executions for many of the individuals (possibly associated with the military presence in York) rather than a form of ritual post-mortem rite or activity.

The fifth chapter, “Decapitations in Ancient European Literature, Art, Material Culture and Ethnography” (104–8), offers a brief survey of the various lines of non-physical evidence for decapitation from the pre-Roman and Roman Iron Ages, including the ancient classical sources (Caesar, Tacitus, Diodorus Siculus, Polybius, Livy, Lucian), iconographic representations (statuary, columns, tombstones), and material culture (e.g., coins, sarcophagi, swords, pottery) from archaeological sites in Britain, Continental Europe, and Northern Africa. Tucker utilizes these sources to build a broader picture of the prominence of the varied uses and methods of decapitation over space and time, which offers a smooth segue into the sixth chapter, “Decapitation Burials from Elsewhere within the Roman Empire” (109–12), which provides a brief overview of the primary skeletal evidence from archaeological sites in Continental Europe, the Mediterranean coast, and Northern Africa. Tucker revealed that the Roman-period examples of decapitation from Continental European contexts mainly appear in the form of isolated skull deposits and articulated skeletons in inhumations, which closely parallels the forms of decapitation and depositional practices from earlier periods in prehistory (Neolithic period and Bronze Age, chap. 2). However, in comparison, decapitation use and modes of deposition and burial from Romano-British sites revealed localized and more diverse patterns overall (outlined in chaps. 3 and 4) (112). Tucker therefore suggests that the localized and diverse forms of decapitation practices discovered in Romano-British sites were local developments, and did not spread from Continental Europe into Britain over time.

The seventh chapter, “Decapitation in the Early Medieval Period” (113–35), much like the previous chapter, provides an overview of the geographical, temporal, and site type contexts of many decapitation burials in Britain during the early medieval period (5th–8th centuries AD). Much like the Romano-British period, decapitations were discovered in formal cemeteries, execution cemeteries, isolated burials, settlement sites, and mass graves (119–31). Tucker confirmed that, prior to the establishment of designated burial grounds, some decapitation burials were included in formal cemeteries alongside “normative” burials, while some were buried in complete isolation until execution cemeteries were established at a later time (132). In addition, her analysis also revealed that the location of the majority of decapitations might have marked important boundaries in various locations, as previously suggested by Reynolds (2009). The practice of decapitation burials serving as potential markers or locational boundaries was reflected in earlier periods; however, these earlier examples did not exhibit as definitive or identifiable patterns as in the early medieval period, which suggests a change in the conception or meaning of decapitation and the importance of the body. This regional analysis in Britain and subsequent conclusions (132–35) are further showcased in Tucker’s osteological analysis (138–44) of the uses of decapitation practices in the following medieval and post-medieval periods in chapter eight (136–45). Much like the previous chapter, Tucker walks the reader through the osteological analysis of decapitated individuals found in a variety of contexts; however, unlike the previous chapters, her analysis revealed that nearly all decapitations were adult males and had extensive peri-mortem trau-

ma, poor diet, and increased physical strain (though the sample was smaller than previous periods). Tucker concludes that the use of decapitation in medieval and post-medieval times differed from earlier periods, and was most likely an incidental form of the physical trauma in many cases or was just one part of a suite of trauma-inducing activities associated with martial or judicial execution contexts (144).

The ninth chapter, “Comparisons between the Decapitated Individuals from the Iron Age, Romano-British and Early Medieval Periods” (146–54), weaves together the many lines of evidence gathered and presented in the earlier chapters to search for continuity between decapitation practices throughout the various temporal periods of Britain. Tucker’s analysis assessed evidence for continuity in the use of decapitation practices from the Iron Age to the early medieval period based on demographic profile, the burial practice, position of the head within the grave, overall health, and evidence for peri-mortem trauma among the individuals selected for the sample. The analysis revealed that compared to earlier temporal periods, individuals from the Romano-British period had more categorical differences in the method of decapitation and selection of individual for decapitation, particularly among the sample of individuals from rural or small town site types. The pre-Roman and Roman Iron Ages had the strongest evidence for continuity between periods based on health status, higher levels of activity-related trauma, decapitation “chopping” trauma, and cranial manipulation. Tucker suggests there may have been continuity in the concept that decapitated individuals were somehow different (particularly during the Romano-British period) when compared to the wider population (151–54). The tenth chapter, “Interpretations of the Practice of Decapitation” (155–65), explores Tucker’s findings further and re-evaluates the potential interpretations for the known decapitation forms over time in Britain. Tucker concludes the volume with a thorough reappraisal of her findings (166–70) and emphasizes the need for reanalysis of skeletal remains, particularly those excavated by antiquarian archaeologists, to identify trauma and pathological health more clearly in the future.

Tucker’s outline for future research (169–70) calls for a more holistic approach to the study of decapitation practices (particularly toward non-adult individuals) through a combination of osteological analysis and the examination of mortuary contexts and historical sources. Specifically, Tucker’s outline shows a need for continued analysis of the large amount of demographic and health status data, which may lead to further revelations about the use of the body in ancient societies.

This book could have benefited from a broader anthropological discussion of cross-cultural ethnographic examples of decapitation and violence over time elsewhere in the world, as those examples may have helped the author further compare the contexts and consider additional interpretations for those practices. In addition, this volume lacks any major discussion of the conceptual and theoretical references to other/strange/unusual/deviant concepts in the archaeological literature. Tucker notes (e.g., 6, 19, 93, 102, 156) that the language of deviancy has plagued most discussions of decapitation burials and practices in prehistory, particularly in antiquarian-dated literature, but does not explore the issue in depth. She states that the “bizarre” nature of decapitation burials peaked her interest during her tenure at the YAT, and thus, a short discussion or reference (especially in chap. 1) advancing our conceptions of de-

capitation away from deviancy or strangeness in the archaeological literature would have been welcomed. In the same light, as most of the volume remains situated comfortably within more standardized bioarchaeological approaches to the study of human activity, scholars may be disappointed with the lack of engaging social theory that could have been used (given the wealth of data) to address larger discussions about the body and its agency, materiality, entanglement, and fragmentation in the past (see Armit 2012; Bonogofsky 2011; Crandall and Martin 2014; Martin et al. 2012; Sofaer 2006).

Although other case studies on decapitation burials and practices have been conducted (see, e.g., Crerar 2012 and Philpott 1991), prior to Tucker's research on human decapitation in British contexts, no large-scale compilation of the data had yet been amassed. Therefore, this volume is not only a repository of information on this subject, but is sure to be considered a seminal work for reference and study in the future. Tucker's research is a welcome addition in the archaeological and anthropological literature, as it illuminates the necessary avenues for future research, providing potential research opportunities to scholars and students with diverse geo-temporal interests on this topic.

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